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ABSTRACT

The language in which we discuss public issues and public officials subtly evokes problematic beliefs about the nature of social problems, their causes, their seriousness, our success or failure in coping with them, which of their aspects are remediable, which cannot be changed, and what impact they have on which groups of people. Social cues rather then rigorous analysis also evoke widespread beliefs about which authorities are competent to deal with particular problems, and the levels of merit and competence of various groups of people. Individuals acquire often conflicting cognitive structures regarding controversial problems. One such pattern of political myth typically defines authorities as competent, those who suffer from the problem as themselves responsible for their troubles, and the political system as sound. The alternative pattern depicts authorities as supportive of elites, those who suffer from the problem as victims, and the system as exploitative. A metonymic or metaphoric reference to any theme in such a pattern of beliefs evokes the entire structure; and syntactic forms can also evoke belief patterns. The fact that a conflicting set of beliefs is also present in the culture and in the mind helps people to live with their ambivalence and to accept public policies they do not like. (Author/JM)

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ABSTRACT

The language in which we discuss public issues and public officials subtly evokes problematic beliefs about the nature of social problems, their causes, their seriousness, our success or failure in coping with them, which of their aspects are remediable, which cannot be changed, and what impacts they have upon which groups of people. Social cues rather than rigorous analysis also evoke widespread beliefs about which authorities are competent to deal with particular problems, the levels of merit and competence of various groups of people, who are allies, and who are enemies.

Individuals acquire alternative, and often conflicting, cognitive structures regarding such controversial problems as poverty and crime. One such pattern of political myth typically defines authorities as competent, those who suffer from the problem as themselves responsible for their troubles, and the political system as sound. The alternative pattern depicts authorities as supportive of elites, those who suffer from the problem as victims, and the system as exploitative. A metonymic or metaphoric reference to any theme in such a pattern of beliefs evokes the entire structure; and syntactic forms can also evoke belief patterns. The fact that a conflicting set of beliefs is also present in the culture and in the mind helps people to live with their ambivalence and to accept public policies they do not like.

The paper also examines the effects upon public opinion of such other rhetoric devices as these: conventional names for social problems; the evocation of imaginary people in reference groups; and the definition of social issues as professional rather than political in character.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Murray Edelman

The language in which we discuss public issues and public officials acquires its distinctive function from the fears and the hopes government arouses in us. Governments deal with many issues that occasion deep anxiety in large numbers of people; and there is inevitably a great deal of uncertainty and controversy regarding what the problems are, what causes them, and what can be done to cope with them. I shall argue that in this setting of anxiety and ambiguity, linguistic cues evoke prestructured beliefs in people's minds regarding the nature and the causes of public problems. Because these beliefs are based upon social cues rather than rigorous analysis, they are likely to be simplistic and distorted: myths that help us cope with widely shared anxieties but typically fail to analyse problems adequately, and can rarely solve them.

Developments in the news do not change such beliefs, but are themselves typically interpreted so as to be consistent with prior beliefs. Each of us holds in his or her mind a set of alternative and often conflicting cognitive structures regarding political issues. The everyday language of government evokes one or another such structure of beliefs, usually in subtle ways.

The point made here may seem a strange one at first, for it suggests that anxious people typically fail to shape their political beliefs in the light of what happens, but rather project a prestructured set of beliefs onto current events. Yet it is clear both that political issues do involve anxiety and that we often perceive new developments in the light of preconceptions already in our minds.

Government as Protection Against Threat

Knowing they are often helpless to control their own fate, people resort to religion and government to cope with anxieties they cannot otherwise ward off. We want to be reassured that, "Man is the captain of his fate" precisely because we know that he too often is not: that whether he lives a happy or a miserable life, what work he does, his level of self-respect, the status he achieves, and the time he dies depend heavily on conditions and decisions over which he has little control.

He and his family must rely upon government to protect them from a gamut of dangers ranging from foreign military attack through criminal attack, oil shortages, and food shortages to unemployment, poverty, and sickness.

We readily recognize that religion helps both to arouse and to assuage anxiety, but seldom recognize that politics both arouses and assuages it as well. We like to think of government as a rational device for achieving people's wants and to see our own political opinions and actions as the epitome of reasoned behavior. Families and public schools reinforce this optimistic view in small children.[1] Yet, with another part of our minds, we are acutely aware that governments shape many public beliefs and demands rather than merely responding to the people's will; and that most of the population of the world will never achieve many of their wants but are at the mercy of governmental economic decisions, military acts, and social policies. We are eager to believe that government will ward off evils and threats, but our very eagerness to believe it renders us susceptible to political language that both intensifies and eases anxiety at least as powerfully as the language of religion does. The Defense Department tells us repeatedly that Russia is surpassing us in one or another form of weapon system, but also tells us that American armed forces are prepared to defend the country. The FBI tells us repeatedly both that crime is

increasing and that the FBI has never been more effective in coping with it. I want to analyze this kind of political language: its most characteristic and most distorting form, though not its only form.

If political language both excites and mollifies fears, language is an integral facet of the political scene: not simply an instrument for describing events but itself a part of events, strongly shaping their meaning and helping to shape the political roles officials and mass publics see themselves as playing. In this sense language, events, and self-conceptions are a part of the same transaction, mutually determining each others' meanings.

"Security" is very likely the primal political symbol. It appeals to what engages people most intensely in news of public affairs and defines developments as threatening or reassuring. In this way leaders gain followings and people are induced to accept sacrifices and to remain susceptible to new cues symbolizing threat or reassurance. The willingness of mass publics to follow, to sacrifice, to accept their roles is the basic necessity for every political regime. Without a following there are no leaders. For governments and for aspirants to leadership it is therefore important both that people become anxious about security and that their anxiety be assuaged, though never completely so. "National security," "social security," and similar terms are therefore potent symbols, though new synonyms for them are sometimes required to avoid banality.

Given the setting of anxiety and ambiguity characteristic of the dilemmas in which people look to government for protection, susceptibility to social cues is strong. The cues come largely from language emanating from sources people want to believe are authoritative and competent to cope with the threats they fear. As already suggested, the beliefs we hold about controversial issues are typically problematic and arbitrary and are often false; but such beliefs

are likely to be accepted uncritically because they serve important functions for people's self-conceptions and justify their political roles.

Following ideas developed by George Herbert Mead and by structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, I suggest that beliefs about social issues, the meanings of pertinent events, feelings about the problems, role definitions, and self-conceptions are integral parts of a single cognitive structure, each facet of it defining and reinforcing the other facets. That we conventionally think of each part of such a structure of patterns of beliefs as distinct and independently arrived at enhances our confidence in them and our attachment to them. Because they may be false but nonetheless give meaning to events, such structures are forms of myth.

There seems to be a pair of opposing myths through which people adapt in everyday life to the kinds of threats that are widely feared. For social problems like poverty or crime, one myth involves seeing the sufferer as responsible for his own plight--authorities and concerned professionals as helping while protecting the rest of society against irresponsible and dangerous people--the social structure as basically sound (pattern one). An alternative myth sees the sufferer as the victim of elites who benefit from his deprivations--the authorities and professionals as helping elites to maintain extant privileges and deprivations--the social structure as basically exploitative (pattern two). When they are stated explicitly in bald form, we are likely to recognize each of these belief patterns as simplistic and inadequate, for neither of them accounts for all poverty or crime. Yet each does explain a phenomenon that bothers and threatens us, helps us to live with our preexisting actions and beliefs, and helps us to interpret news so as to perpetuate preexisting cognitive structures. When they are not stated explicitly, but evoked subtly through linguistic cues of the kind I will examine shortly, we do not question them as simplistic, but rather

embrace them as satisfying our cognitive and emotional needs. In this sense political opinion on controversial issues is typically based upon social cues rather than empirical observation. Because the set of basic myths available to us is small (a dialectical pair), it is all the easier for an inconspicuous linguistic cue (like "helping," "welfare," or "repression") to evoke the entire cognitive structure.

The more critical reason linguistic cues are evocative of larger belief structures, however, must lie in the mutually reinforcing character of the distinct parts of any structure of political cognitions: their transformations into each other. To believe that the poor are basically responsible for their poverty is also to exonerate economic and political institutions from that responsibility and to legitimize the efforts of authorities to change the poor person's attitudes and behavior. Any one of these beliefs inevitably implies the others in the structure, even though we conventionally <u>experience</u> them as three distinct beliefs about (1) the psychology of the poor; (2) the roles of professionals and public officials, and (3) the health of the economy and the polity. A reference to any part of the cognitive structure evokes the entire structure. For most of the middle class, public officials, and helping professionals this myth justifies their own status, power, and roles, provides an acceptable reason to oppose redistribution of the national product in a more egalitarian way, and offers a justification for their authority over the deprived. A large part of the deprived population also has reason to accept this myth, for they have little ground for self-esteem except through their identification with the state and the elite. This myth, therefore, is the dominant one.

Given a strong incentive toward this pattern of belief, it is most effectively evoked by a term that implies the rest of the cognitive structure without expressly calling attention to it. To declare explicitly that the cause of

poverty is the laziness of its victims is to arouse questions and doubts, and to call counterevidence to mind. Similarly, an explicit statement that welfare administrators and social workers are coping competently and effectively with the poverty problem or that economic institutions are not involved in it or responsible for it arouses skepticism, not belief. But a casual reference to the "welfare problem," to "the need for counselling welfare recipients," or to a "work test" provision unconsciously creates or reinforces a "pattern one" myth in those whose interests are served by a widespread belief in such a myth. For believers, it justifies a role and self-conception they cherish. It is therefore understandable why cognitive structures rationalizing the status quo are so readily engendered in the overwhelming majority: both in those who benefit a great deal from existing institutions and in those who benefit relatively little but draw what self-esteem they have from their identification with a state and a social order they have been socialized to see as benevolent. The myth lends consonant meanings to every subsequent act and event. Without it people could not comfortably live with themselves or with their social order. With it, they adapt to their roles in that order, whether the roles are achieved or ascribed. The opposite myth is evoked in much the same way and serves the same kind of symbolic function for those forced by circumstances or analysis to draw their self-esteem from identification with a movement for fundamental change in the social order.

As people hear the news every day, they fit it into three themes (sometimes called mythemes), comprising the basic structural elements of each form of myth. In this way new developments and experiences are likely to reinforce the same meanings and illustrate them rather than to change them. For the social scientist, moreover, these meanings therefore remain problematic, for they cannot be conclusively verified or falsified.

Claude Levi-Strauss suggests that myths deal with "unwelcome contradictions." His insight clarifies the function of our contemporary myths about social problems as well. Clearly, both elites and those who suffer from social problems have good reason to be ambivalent about their adherence to either of the cognitive structures outlined above. Though political, economic, and professional elites and most of the middle class benefit economically and in status from the "pattern one" myth, the very inequalities it rationalizes are bound to arouse some qualms of conscience, and few of them can be unaware of the shaky premises upon which it rests. Those who embrace pattern two must be aware that victims of social problems do sometimes suffer from physiological or psychological problems, though many of these problems may stem from economic and social deprivations. One or the other myth may be dominant, but each of us relies on both of them to justify our statuses and roles and at the same time to assuage our consciences about inequalities in status, money, and power. Both mythic patterns are present in our culture and in our minds, ready to serve our egos when we need them. The myths allow people to live with themselves and their social order, but cannot erase the unwelcome contradiction that continues to plague them and that must be continuously resolved by renewed evocations of myth through language and through governmental actions. For this reason anxiety about threats to security, including threats to people's social roles and status, are not eliminated, and neither is the need for governmental regimes to engender and reinforce myths. That is how regimes survive and win support, for the very myths they evoke make it impossible for them to deal effectively with chronic problems.

Levi-Strauss declares that, "...the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if as it happens, the contradiction is real)..."[2] Each of the primitive and religious myths he analyzes in his own work includes the oppositions and contradictions

within itself. In the case of political myths, the basic function of overcoming a contradiction is still central, I think, but we find a pair of opposing myths for each of the conflicting cognitive patterns that define our attitudes toward social problems, the authorities who deal with them, and the people who suffer from them. Our ambivalence is expressed in separate, concomitant myths, each of them internally consistent, though they are inconsistent with each other.

This structural difference between political and folk myths makes sense when we recall that a political myth serves to express and to undergird conflict between organized political groups as well as within the individual person. As members of political parties, ideological groups, and social movements, individuals lean toward one mythic pattern or the other. In this sense organized conflict between groups reflects separate mythic patterns. At the same time the availability in the culture of the opposing myth permits the individual to reconcile contradictions and live with his ambivalence.

To sum up, we can make the following generalizations about the structure of political myths: (1) For any pattern of beliefs about a controversial issue, the various components of the cognitive structure (beliefs about the cause of the problem, the roles of authorities, the classification of people according to levels of merit, the effective remedies) reinforce each other and evoke each other. (2) Myths regarding social problems conventionally classified as different (crime, poverty, mental illness) include the same fundamental mythemes. (3) Minor variations in the same basic myth at different times and in different places reflect and express the range of tensions and intellectual impulses within the society. (4) The two mythic patterns that reflect conflicting cognitions remain separate, though both remain available for use when groups or individuals need them to resolve conflicts.

A fifth generalization, following another lead suggested by Levi-Strauss, is that the actions governments take to cope with social problems often contradict, as well as reflect, the myths used to rationalize those actions. While claiming to rehabilitate prisoners and the emotionally disturbed, authorities typically constrain and punish them. While claiming to help the poor, public welfare agencies control them and take pains to limit the help offered to a minimum usually inadequate for decent living. Governmental rhetoric and action, taken together, comprise an elaborate dialectical structure, reflecting the beliefs, the tensions, and the ambivalences that flow from social inequality and conflicting interests.

RHETORICAL EVOCATIONS

It is through metaphor, metonymy, and syntax that linguistic references evoke mythic cognitive structures in people's minds.[3] That this is so is hardly surprising, for we naturally define ambiguous situations that concern us by focusing on one part of them or by comparing them with what is familiar.

A reference in an authoritative public statement or in a Social Security law to "training programs" for the unemployed is a metonymic evocation of a larger structure of beliefs: a belief that job training is efficacious in solving the unemployment problem, a belief that workers are unemployed because they lack necessary skills, a belief that jobs are available for those trained to take them. Because each component of this interrelated set of beliefs is either dubious or false, job training has been ineffective as a strategy. But people who are anxious to fight unemployment and eager to believe the problem can be solved without drastic social change are ready to accept this kind of reassuring cue. In the same way people who feel threatened by extant social institutions are disposed to accept the cognitive structure implied by the term

"political prisoner"; for the definition of a larcenist or drug addict as a political prisoner implies a great deal more: a polity that drives those it deprives to desperate measures, law enforcers who suppress dissidents, prisoners who are victims rather than criminals, and an observer who cherishes the role of radical.

Metaphor is equally effective and probably even more common in the linguistic evocation of political myths. The eminent psychologist Theodore Sarbin has suggested that when Theresa of Avila referred in the seventeenth century to the problems of emotionally disturbed people as being like an illness, she used a metaphor which ultimately became a myth.[4] In view of anthropological evidence that cultures differ greatly in what they define as mental abnormality and other studies demonstrating the social basis of such labeling, many social scientists, including Sarbin, believe that the judgment involved in calling someone "schizophrenic" is basically moral, not medical. Yet the metaphor of "mental illness" has become a myth widely accepted by laymen and conventional psychiatrists. It is used everyday to deny freedom and dignity to people who already suffer from too little of either, and it is often used to enforce conformity to middle class norms in the United States and to Communist Party norms in the Soviet Union. Sarbin suggests that such movement from metaphor to myth is a common social phenomenon. I would add that it is especially common as a political phenomenon.

Even the syntactic structure of political language can evoke a set of mythic beliefs, perhaps in even more subtle and powerful fashion than metonymy or metaphor do. I have discussed the significance of form in political language in some detail elsewhere[5] and so refer to it here only in passing. When politicians and government officials appeal for public support for policies or candidates, the <u>form</u> of their statements conveys the message that public opinion is influential, and it does so both for those who accept the particular appeal and for those who

do not, regardless of the content of the statement. If an appeal for support is made, then support obviously counts. The form of legal language also conveys a reassuring message regardless of its content. Because the language of statutes, constitutions, and treaties consists of definitions and of specific commands to judges, administrative officials, and the general public to behave in ways specified by elected representatives of the people, its very form conveys reassurance of popular sovereignty and the rule of law. Lawyers take the ambiguity of legal language for granted in their practice, constantly disputing the meaning of terms; but to the general public legal language symbolizes precision and clarity in specifying the will of legislatures and constitutional conventions. Lawyers themselves typically see it in this reassuring way when they are making Fourth of July speeches or discussing government in the abstract rather than arguing in court that an adversary's interpretation of the law is mistaken. Here again is evidence of the pervasive ambivalence characteristic of our political beliefs and of the availability of alternative political myths to enable us to play alternative roles and to resolve difficult contradictions.

The Linguistic Structuring of Social Problems

Let us consider the political implications of our conventional mode of naming and classifying our most common social "problems": poverty, crime, mental illness, occupational illness, drug abuse, and inadequate education. We establish separate departments of government to deal with these supposedly distinct problems (departments of welfare, criminal justice, education, health, for example), and staff them with people trained to focus upon a particular set of symptoms and to believe in a distinctive set of causes for each of them. Such a classification evokes wide-ranging beliefs and perceptions that we typically accept uncritically precisely because they are generated subtly by the terms used

to designate them. The classification implies, first, that these various problems are distinct from each other, with different causes just as they have separate symptoms. In the light of a growing body of research this premise is grossly simplistic and distorting. In an important sense all of these problems stem wholly or largely from the functioning of our economic institutions. If economic institutions functioned without unemployment, poorly paid work, degrading work, or inadequate industrial pension and health programs, there would manifestly be very little poverty. Is poverty, then, a problem of "welfare" or of economic institutions? The first label obviously confuses the symptom with the cause, yet we routinely use it and accept its far-reaching implications, which I explore shortly.

A recent study of Work in America finds that the work adults do is central in the lives of most of them, critical to their self-conceptions and their self-esteem; but the study also shows that many workers at all occupational levels find their work so stultifying and demeaning that it is a major contributor to physical illness, emotional disturbance, alcoholism, and drug abuse.[6] In short, this and many other studies suggest that the various social "problems" we treat separately are very largely symptoms of the same problem: an economic system that produces too few jobs, too little income or security, and too few opportunities for self-fulfillment.

Terms like "mental illness," "criminal," and "drug abuse" focus attention upon the alleged weakness and pathology of the individual while diverting attention from their pathological social and economic environments, another belief about causation that is partially accurate at best and inevitably misleading about effective remedies. In consequence we maintain prisons that contribute to crime as a way of life for their inmates, mental hospitals that contribute to "mental illness," as a way of life for their inmates, and high

rates of recidivism for all these "problems." But the names by which we refer to people and their problems continue, with remarkable potency and durability, to keep the attention of authorities, professionals, and the general public focused upon the largely fictional rehabilitation the names connote and to divert attention from the counter-productive results of established policies.

Our conventional names for social problems also evoke other beliefs and perceptions ranging from dubious through partly invalid to misleading. The "welfare" label connotes to a great many people that the problem lies in a public dole, which encourages laziness. This widespread belief about the cause of poverty is further reinforced by other political terms, such as the "work test" provisions widely publicized in the 1967 and 1971 Social Security Act amendments. Our language creates a picture of hundreds of thousands of welfare recipients refusing a plentiful supply of productive work; but the pertinent research shows (1) that only a very small percentage of the recipients are physically able to work, and even these typically cannot find jobs, with unemployment levels running between five and six percent of the labor force and usually far higher in the localities where the recipients are concentrated; and (2) that welfare benefits do not detract from work incentive.[7]

Because public policies and rhetoric often create misleading beliefs about the causes and the nature of these problems, they also assure that the problems will not be solved, as they manifestly have not been. While we increase the expenditures, the layers of bureaucracy, and the numbers of professionals dealing with crime, welfare, emotional disturbance, and illness, the number of victims of all of them continues to increase.[8] Rehabilitation and rational solution of problems occurs very largely in rhetoric rather than in fact. But the rhetoric and the myths it evokes permit us to live with ourselves and with our problems. They also guarantee that perceptions of threats and of efforts to overcome them

will maintain social tension, anxiety, and continued susceptibility to verbal cues that legitimize elites and government policies regardless of their effectiveness.

Our categorizations of these problems create cognitive structures even more intricate than this discussion has so far suggested. They imply that the laziness of the poor and the waywardness of the delinquent are changeable and that governmental and professional rewards, punishments, and treatments will change them; but the classification scheme by the same token defines economic institutions as a fixed part of the scene, not an issue to be confronted. In this way the name for a problem can also create beliefs about what conditions public policy can change and what it cannot touch.

Still another facet of this cognitive structure deals with the statuses of people. When we name and classify a problem, we unconsciously establish the status and the roles of those involved with it, including their self-conceptions. If the "problem" is an economic system that yields inadequate monetary and psychological benefits, then the working poor and the unemployed are victims rather than lazy or incompetent; the economic elite may be lucky or unscrupulous rather than competent and industrious; those who refuse to play conventional roles are rational or moral or self-protective rather than mentally ill; and so on. How the problem is named involves alternative scenarios, each with its own facts, value judgments, and emotions. The self-conceptions that are a part of these cognitive structures explain the tenacity and passion with which people cling to them and interpret developments so as to make them consonant with a structure. For the choice of a particular configuration of beliefs has profound consequences for the individual: his role and status, his powers and responsibilities, and what counts as success for her or him.

No mythic structure can persist and retain its potency unless others share it too, each believer reinforcing the faith of the others. No person is a success or a problem, no issue is distinctive or important, unless others see them that way. The authority and status of public officials, politicians, and "helping professionals" therefore depend upon public acceptance of their norms regarding merit and deviance and of their definition of issues. The authority's insecurity and need for public support is correlative with the public's anxiety about the problems he presents himself as able to handle.

Let us consider next some of the more common devices through which political language helps engender and maintain alternative cognitive structures in large groups of people.

The Evocation of Mythical Populations as Reference Groups

Perhaps the archetypical device for influencing opinion regarding political issues and actors is the evocation of beliefs about the problems, the intentions, or the moral condition of large groups of people whose very existence is problematic, but who become the benchmarks by which real people shape their political beliefs and perceptions.

Sometimes such myths are essentially accurate. When, in the trough of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt referred to "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-fed" he was manifestly employing rhetoric to marshal support for policies he favored; but his assertion about a sizeable fraction of the American people was not an exaggeration by observations widely made and little challenged.

Politicians' statements about people's attitudes or situations are often either impossible to verify or quite clearly invalid. When, in the midst of widespread public objections to the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon referred to a "silent majority" that supported his hawkish war policy, his allegation was

dubious in light of pertinent research.[9] Its function was to evoke a reference group other than the plainly visible and nonsilent one for the very large number of people who were torn or uncertain regarding their position on the war. For such a purpose a "majority" that cannot be observed or measured because it is "silent" is manifestly ideal. For people who are looking for a reason to support the President and the war, the "silent majority" serves its purpose even if it does not exist.

Anxious people reliant upon dubious and conflicting cues can usually choose from available public messages that one that supports a policy consistent with their economic interests or ideological bent. Groups trying to marshal support for a position therefore benefit from making public statements that will justify the positions of their potential supporters. The facts regarding controversial political issues are typically so complex, difficult to observe, and ambiguous that it is usually easy to find a set of allegations that both serve this rationalizing function and are not manifestly untrue. They can be deliberate lies and sometimes are; they are often interpretations their audience would recognize as dubious if it knew enough about the observations on which they are based; and sometimes they are factual. As influences upon political opinion, however, their verifiability is less important than their availability, in view of the setting of anxiety for many and ambiguity for all in which controversial policy formation takes place.

Statistics evoke mythical reference groups too, though often in a nonobvious way. Let us examine the dynamics of the process in order to clarify further the link between language and political opinion formation. Why is it so helpful to an incumbent administration that the month's unemployment statistics show a downturn and so useful to the political opposition when they show an upturn? People without a job suffer no matter what general trends the government statistics

show, and their personal experiences are certainly more critical to their beliefs, feelings, and political behavior than news accounts of trends. The point is, however, that the statistics do provide the key benchmark for the overwhelming majority who are not directly affected by unemployment. Anxiety about their own job security and that of their friends and relatives is widespread; so cues about an incumbent administration's performance strike close to home. In this case, too, the validity of the cue is problematic, for the official statistics regularly understate the unemployment level and official rhetoric always overstates the role of government when conditions improve. Statistics understate unemployment by failing to count as unemployed people so discouraged with job hunting that they do not actively seek work. The statistics serve a need, however, regardless of whether they are misleading, and they serve it all the better because they are presented as "hard data." They evoke a belief that the unemployed population is rising or declining in size, that a particular monthly increase is an aberration or that it is part of a long-term trend. They, therefore do a great deal to engender political support or distrust among people who are anxious about the state of the economy and about their own futures.

In the same way many other kinds of time series statistics evoke fictional reference groups and benchmarks. A decline in the rate of increase in reported crimes reassures anxious people that the government is re-establishing law and order; but such a statistical decline is usually an artifact of the method of computing it (The same increase in crime every year obviously yields a marked decline in the rate) or of the zeal of law enforcement agencies in reporting crimes.

Statistics are so effective in shaping political support and opposition that governments quite often resort to publicizing statistics that have little or no reasonable bearing on an issue creating anxiety, either because none that do have a bearing are available or because the pertinent ones point in the wrong direction.

If a Southeast Asian war turns out to be a disaster, a modicum of public support can still be maintained by disseminating enemy "body counts" suggesting that ten times as many enemy as American soldiers are being killed every week or month. As visible and easily understood "hard data," the statistics mask both their lack of bearing on the question of who is "winning" the war and the fabrication of the figures by field commanders whose promotions depend upon the reporting of high enemy body counts. This example is an extreme one, but for that reason it illustrates all the better the possibility of creating persuasive benchmarks for anxious people eager to find a reason to believe whatever will serve their interests or their ideological inclinations.

Inconspicuous and implicit references frequently create the impression a public policy is helping the needy even when the policies chiefly benefit the affluent. For at least four decades legislation purporting to help "the poor farmer" or "the family farmer" has in fact transferred millions of dollars from the taxpayers to corporate farming enterprises while helping to drive the family farmer into the city. A combination of sympathy for the small farmer and of eagerness to entrust policy-making to those who supposedly know how to deal with problems endows a casual term with the power to evoke a cognitive structure quite removed from reality but politically potent nonetheless.

Sometimes the ideological appeal of a symbol is apparently stronger than the observable conditions in which people live their everyday lives. One study notices, for example, that welfare recipients almost always refer to welfare recipients as "they" rather than "we"; and that a majority of people on welfare favor midnight searches of the homes of welfare recipients and required budget counselling.[10] These people ignore their own experiences and focus upon a mythical population of welfare parasites created by the language of their political adversaries.

Fortunately, such symbolic devices are not omnipotent. People often do resist them when they run counter to their self-evident or perceived interests; but many manifestly do not.

Planning and Professionalism as Antipolitics

Another common lingustic form immobilizes political opposition that cannot be coopted or reshaped to support elites. Whenever a political issue produces conflict, or an impasse, or a result unacceptable to elites, it is predictable that some will define and perceive the issue in question as inappropriate for politics: as professional or technical in character, calling for specialized expertise rather than political negotiation and compromise. There is always a good deal of receptivity throughout the population to this way of defining a difficult issue, for it allows people who are worried but baffled by a problem to believe that those who know best will deal with it effectively. Few people like to live a politicized life, and that is probably a good thing. Other values are more important to most of us than political participation. We would rather make love than war, rather read literature, ski, play pool, or make pottery than discuss urban zoning or international trade agreements. At the same time we are anxiously aware that political decisions can affect our lives profoundly and even end them. A common consequence of this combination of deep concern and lack of interest in detailed participation is eagerness to accept those who present themselves as knowledgeable and who are willing to make political decisions. Because acceptance of the leader or authority who supposedly knows how to cope is so largely based on eagerness to ignore politics, it is understandable that authoritative decisions tend to be accepted for long periods, regardless of their consequences. The authority's charisma, stemming from his dramaturgy of coping with anxiety-producing problems, is what focuses public attention, not the impacts of his policies, which are themselves difficult to know, even after detailed study.

A course so satisfying both to leaders and to mass publics is bound to look appropriate often; and so we define an increasing range of decisions as "professional" or "technical," and therefore nonpolitical. When authorities label an issue in this way, I suspect that they seldom self-consciously see themselves as avoiding politics in order to enhance their power and nullify the influence of other groups, but that is certainly the consequence.

Consider some of the "problems" in which the critical decisions are routinely made so as to exclude the most seriously affected groups from influence. Highway engineers regularly conclude that city expressways can most economically be built through the neighborhoods in which the poor live, thereby destroying the communities that are important to the poor and depriving them of low cost housing. But it is accepted that this kind of decision should be based chiefly upon engineering considerations; and engineers learn in school how to calculate costs. The denial to the poor of influence proportionate to their suffering from such policies is legitimized for many, including many of the poor themselves, by defining the issue as basically professional. To most of the middle class who are aware that there is an "issue," the rationality of the process is self-evident and the costs to the poor invisible. The designation of the issue as "professional" or "technical" is manifestly metaphoric, for it highlights one of its aspects while masking others; but the metaphor evokes and reinforces a self-perpetuating cognitive structure in the individual and a dominant public opinion in the polity.

The treatment of "deviance" affects an even larger fraction of the population and elicits an even more uncritical acceptance of the view that a controversial issue is "professional" and nonpolitical in character. The "pattern one" myth discussed earlier wins general support for the view that psychiatrists, not legislative bodies, should decide what social behavior is normal and what is

abnormal--even though a great many studies have made it clear that psychiatrists often define behavior as normal or deviant according to whether it conforms to middle class norms rather than on the basis of medical or technically specialized observations. So, in general, do social workers, teachers, policemen, and judges.[11] A medical or professional label ("sociopathic," "impulsive-hysteric," "underachiever," "cognitive deficiency") nonetheless both justifies taking issues involving the well-being of large groups of people out of politics and legitimizes the professional imposition of judgments that can mean ruined careers or incarceration. Yet social work journals assert that the poor are especially prone to cognitive deficiencies,[12] and psychiatrists that women are prone to impulsive-hysteria.[13] Middle class teachers too often conclude from a poor child's demeanor, speech, and dress that he is an underachiever. Such judgments are clearly class based and manifestly political. It is no accident that the professional judgments of the helping professions so frequently coincide with widespread popular prejudices, in view of the ambiguity and low reliability and validity characteristic of these decisions. The professional labels nevertheless engender widespread support, among both the rich and the poor, for denying influence to those who suffer from their effects; for professionals present themselves as able to deal with problems we fear, yet know we do not understand.

The language of the helping professions exemplifies a common political phenomenon: public support depends heavily upon the motives we ascribe to authorities, not upon the consequences of their actions. In a setting of anxiety and ambiguity the widely publicized language of helping, healing, and rehabilitation of the disturbed readily draws public approval, while technical studies showing high recidivism rates and the manufacture of pathology through professional labeling draw little popular awareness and virtually no political impact. In the same way regulatory commissions that do not regulate and international

disarmament conferences that never disarm continue indefinitely to win followings for leaders without yielding the benefits they promise.

Public officials regularly reconstruct their behavior and their motives in order to legitimize their actions in terms that will bring broad public support. Piven and Cloward have shown, for example, that welfare rolls expand when social disorder increases and contract when the authorities recognize they can cut people off of welfare without fear of further disorder.[14] Both legislative and administrative decisions to expand or contract the number of welfare recipients are inevitably justified, however, in terms of professional judgments of need. If disorder is mentioned in rhetoric, it is almost always to deny that the authorities will yield to "violent and illegitimate demands." The rhetoric manifestly serves to win support, not to describe the grounds for decisionmaking.

Increasingly, public officials cite their specialized knowledge and the need for expert planning as reason to exclude from politics the very decisions that impinge most heavily upon public well-being. Neither the public nor Congress, we are now told, can be trusted to decide when to wage war or escalate it because only the executive has the special intelligence to know such things. Foreign policy in general should be above politics. Urban planning is for urban planners, not for the people who live in cities, and especially not for those who live in central cities rather than suburbs. And so on.

Notice that it is the categorization of these problems that legitimizes the power of specialized authorities to deal with them, even though their decisions systematically affect many other aspects of people's lives. Military planners create employment in some places, unemployment in others, inflation everywhere, and moral dilemmas in many; but the problem is labeled "military." Psychiatrists reinforce the norm that cheerful adjustment to poverty or war is healthy while despondency or anger in the face of these pathologies is sick; but their decisions are labeled "medical."

In the contemporary world a governmental decision is likely to have severe effects upon many aspects of our lives, not upon only one or a few. For this reason the labeling of policies as "military" or "medical" is both metaphoric and metonymic. It stands for a larger pattern of cognitions, or it highlights a similarity to something familiar, while masking other critical features. In doing so it legitimizes a specific kind of political authority while degrading the claim of mass publics to participate in policy-making. Because anxiety about foreign enemies, internal subversion, and deviant behavior is especially widespread and frequently reinforced by government officials, military, police, and psychiatric authorities benefit most consistently from this form of linguistic structuring. Anxiety about economic survival and social problems, by contrast, is limited to particular groups, far more sporadic, and is constantly deflated by governmental claims that the outlook is good. Every regime thinks it is politically essential to claim that its economic and social policies are working successfully, even while it reinforces fears of foreign and internal enemies. In consequence, economic and social deprivations that flow from decisions classified as "military," "security," or "rehabilitative" are more readily concealed from mass publics through metaphor. Such systematic inflation of the forms of threat that legitimize authority and systematic deflation of the forms of threat that legitimize domestic redistribution of goods and power inevitably has consequences for the effectiveness of public policies. It diverts resources toward coping with mythical threats and makes it unlikely that the real problems of nonelites will be solved.

The Linguistic Segmentation of the Political World

To make this point is to recognize that the various issues with which governments deal are highly interrelated in the contemporary world, even though we are cued to perceive them as distinct. There is another sense in which such cuing influences public opinion about politics. Because each day's news and

each day's governmental announcements evoke anxieties and reassurances about specific "problems" perceived as separate from each other (foreign affairs, strikes, fuel shortages, food shortages, prices, party politics, and so on), our political worlds are segmented, disjointed, focused at any moment upon some small set of anxieties, even though each such "issue" is a part of an increasingly integrated whole. Wars bring commodity shortages and rising prices, which in turn foment worker discontent and a search for enemies. Economic prosperity brings a decline in theft and vagrancy and an increase in white collar crime, higher demands for fuel, and other ramifications. But our mode of referring to problems and policies creates for each of us a succession of crises, of respites, of separate grounds for anxiety and for hope. Where people do perceive links among issues, that perception itself is likely to be arbitrary and politically cued, for reasons already discussed. To experience the political world as a sequence of distinct events, randomly threatening or reassuring, renders people readily susceptible to cues, both deliberate and unintended: for the environment becomes unpredictable and people remain continuously anxious. In place of the ability to deal with issues in terms of their logical and empirical ties to each other, the language of politics encourages us to see them and to feel them as separate. This, too, is a formula for coping with them ineffectively, which is bound to reinforce anxiety in its turn.

Created Worlds

It should be clear, then, that beliefs and perceptions based upon governmental cues are not the exception but all too common. In every significant respect political issues and actors assume characteristics that are symbolically cued. From subtle linguistic evocations and associated governmental actions we get a great many of our beliefs about what our problems are, their causes, their seriousness, our success or failure in coping with them, which aspects are fixed

and which are changeable, and what impacts they have upon which groups of people. We are similarly cued into beliefs about which authorities can deal with which problems, the levels of merit and competence of various groups of the population, who are allies, and who are enemies. Though symbolic cues are not omnipotent, they go far toward defining the geography and the topography of everyone's political world.

NOTES

1. David Easton and Jack Dennis, Children in the Political System, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969; Fred I. Greenstein, Children and Politics, rev. ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

2. Claude Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, New York: Basic Books, 1963, p. 229.

3. Governmental actions and routines also engender cognitions. For a discussion of this phenomenon see Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964, chs. 2, 3; and Murray Edelman, Politics as Symbolic Action, Chicago: Markham, 1971, Chapter 3.

4. Theodore R. Sarbin, "Schizophrenia is a Myth, Born of Metaphor, Meaningless," Psychology Today, Vol. 6 (June 1972), pp. 18 ff.

5. Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics, Chapter 7.

6. U.S., Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Work in America, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972.

7. Leonard Goodwin, Do the Poor Want to Work?, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1972; Report of the New Jersey Graduated Work Incentive Experiment, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973.

8. For a trenchant discussion and illustration of this point see Robert Alford, The Politics of Health Care, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming.

9. John E. Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," American Political Science Review, Vol. 65 (June 1971), pp. 358-75.

10. Frances F. Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Regulating the Poor, New York: Vintage, 1971, p. 172.

11. I have examined this phenomenon in some detail in "The Political Language of the Helping Professions," University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty, Discussion Paper 195-74, 1974.

12. Cf. Robert Sunley, "New Dimensions in Reaching-Out Casework," Social Work, Vol. 13 (April 1968), pp. 64-74.

13. Cf. David Shapiro, Four Neurotic Styles, New York: Basic Books, 1965.

14. Piven and Cloward, Regulating the Poor, Chapter 1.